

Appleby Archaeology Group September Meeting

The Appleby Archaeology group enjoyed an imaginary journey along the Settle to Carlisle line when Peter Robinson spoke about the building of the railway, highlighting the engineering work, the archaeological evidence and the social conditions of the navies .

After some political wrangling the Midland Railway began construction of the railway in November 1870. There were four main contractors working on the 72 miles of track and Mr Robinson concentrated on Contract I, awarded to John Ashwell, for the Settle to Dent section. The contractors had little concept of the terrain and potential weather conditions, factors which delayed and increased the cost of construction. The line was finally opened to passengers in 1876, when it was advertised as the most scenic and comfortable route on which to travel north.

Slides of plans, many drawn on site, and of photographs of the construction in progress demonstrated the enormity of the venture. The ascending gradient is 1:100 and tramways had to be built to bring building materials and coal to power the machinery to the construction sites. Evidence of track ways, brick works, limekilns and some of the quarries from which the limestone was extracted can be seen in the landscape today.

Two of the major constructions between Settle and Dent are the Ribbleshead viaduct and the Blea Moor tunnel. The piers of the viaduct were sunk deep in Batty Moss and wooden scaffolding erected to enable the building of the 24 limestone arches which span a length 440yards. Blea Moor tunnel is the longest on the line and several shafts were sunk and winding gear installed to remove the soil and rock and to lower the supplies of brick and mortar needed to line the tunnel. On the moor the top of the ventilation shafts, circular brick structures, can be seen and beside the old tramways piles of debris from the tunnelling and remains of the shaft sites, some showing traces of the winding gear, are visible

Encampments, with names such as Jericho, Sebastopol and Batty Wife Hole, were built between Ribbleshead and Dent to house the workforce of about 2000. These shanty towns were built, lived in and dismantled in a seven year period and yet today remains of the buildings can be picked out from aerial photographs and from the ground. A hut provided accommodation for a family who acted as landlords and several lodgers, 16 was the highest number that Mr Robinson had noted.

There is evidence of other buildings such as saddlers, a brewery and a hospital. Tradesmen from Sedburg and Ingleton supplied the shops in the encampments, doctors visited and the contractors set up a school at Ribbleshead and approved a Bible reader for the navvies.

The census for 1871, parish registers, newspaper articles and old photographs have provided insight into the lives and deaths of those working on the railway. The census, contrary to common belief, shows that the majority of navvies came from the south west and only a very small proportion from Ireland. A burial register from Chapel-le-Dale shows a high death rate from disease especially in the children.

Mr Robinson concluded by outlining the history of the line since 1876 and it was good to learn that the line now carries many more passengers and freight than it did 20 years ago, perhaps the best tribute to those who designed and built the railway in the 19th century.

Mr Robinson answered a number of questions before being thanked by the chairman for a most interesting talk.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday October 14th, in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby at 7.30pm when Steve Dickinson will talk on Viking Settlements in the Lake District.

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